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SUBJECT: MYTH BUSTER: COCA-FREE WAYS TO SUPPORT YOUR FAMILY

1. Summary: A USG-funded program helps break the myth that poor farmers in Peru can only feed and educate their kids by growing coca. The Institute of Tropical Crops (ICT), supported primarily by INL, helps farmers manage an integrated mix of crops, centered on cacao. During a recent visit, training participants told the NAS director how they are successfully raising their families, educating their children and investing in other ways of generating income, all without coca. Testimonials from two of the farmers were positively received by participants at the Acceso Cacao kick-off conference June 3 in Lima. End Summary.

The Myth

2. The cocalero establishment has successfully established the myth of the "poor coca farmer" who only has one alternative, growing coca, to live. This picture sticks, and is repeated by many well-meaning people, despite the fact that most Peruvians, even in the coca zones, do not plant coca. Indeed, the overall poverty of the coca zones shows clearly that coca is not an answer to poverty; the exploited farmers at the end of the drug-making chain are kept in penury by an industry that drives off productive investment.

The Reality

3. Despite the challenges of working in zones that are challenging for development, and are deficient in infrastructure and state presence, different agencies working in the Huallaga valley have promoted an integrated mix of crops that can give farmers food and income. While it is difficult to match the relatively easy income from coca, many farmers and small business people have found that they can achieve a life of dignity and security. ICT is one of the agencies that help make this possible.

The Means

4. The obvious question is why INL/NAS supports an effort that sounds like a USAID project. The initial, and on-going link, is research into coca and licit crops. The U.S. government, through INL, the Agricultural Research Service of the US Department of Agriculture, and the DEA began funding research into coca cultivation through members of the faculty of the National University of the Jungle in Tingo Maria. The group subsequently formed the Non-Governmental Organization, Institute for Tropical Crops (ICT) in Tarapoto. ICT complemented this funding with their own funds, agreements with the GOP and local cooperatives, OAS/CICAD and other small grants; developing a large body of knowledge about crop management in the coca-growing areas. Their operational research included technical assistance to farmers in the area, and the results generated farmer demand for more training and assistance.

5. In 1999, INL began funding additional agricultural extension to spread this knowledge to other areas of the Huallaga; ICT now provides technical assistance to farmers throughout the valley, plus occasional presentations in a number of other areas. Their work includes lab investigations, operational research, demonstration plots, technical visits, short trainings and on-site theory and practice at the institute. They now require trainees to phase out their coca. They have reached over 27,000 farmers since 1999 through events ranging from introductory "mega courses" to the intense 1-week internships initiated in 2001. Since October 2004, 17 extensionists provide on-going technical assistance to 1,113 farmers in three zones of the Huallaga. ICT also trained technicians from other development agencies, such as Winrock and CARE. Research into coca, cacao and agricultural management continues.

Voices from the field

16. The change is not easy, but farmers who have lived through the violence and uncertainty of the coca era are willing to make the effort-and succeed, " with a little help from their friends." Here are the stories of two outstanding farmers.

17. Don Antonio sold his worn-out coca land a number of years ago, but now wishes he'd kept it. With what he knows now, he could have rehabilitated the leached soil and planted more cacao. After getting out of coca, he worked odd jobs, then decided to try cacao, a crop that had flourished in Tocache before the coca boom. He did not have the necessary technical knowledge, and tried to get help from a number of different agencies before a local radio extensionist gave him some initial assistance. This was followed by assistance from ICT, which helped him develop his two and a half-hectare farm into an outstanding cacao plantation. He harvests over two metric tons per hectare each year-almost four times the average in the area, and twice the goal set by ICT. Don Antonio proudly states that he has educated his children to be professionals; he lives comfortably and just bought a moto-taxi to supplement his farm income. He is also a model for the community. His neighbor has copied his techniques and also has a thriving farm. Antonio has become so adept at grafting productive clones to rootstock that he sells his services to other farmers. Don Antonio returned to the internship course as a master teacher, to help his neighbors and other learn, and as a striking example of what the future can hold for them.

18. Doa Judith is a dynamic young woman reminiscent of a Chinese acrobat, spinning multiple plates while doing gymnastics. Cacao is her main business; she has never grown coca, despite pressure to do so in her community. She has received assistance from ICT with her eight hectares of cacao and is making enough money to send her children to private schools, an accomplishment she proudly mentions. Judith has also received help from other sources, such as a loan from USAID contractor Prisma and an award from GTZ. She also makes and sells yogurt and fruit drinks, keeps hives and sells honey, and makes marmalade and wine from cacao fruit. Her strongest message to her fellow classmates: train the women as well as the men. (Her class has seven women, out of thirty; on the high side of ICT's average class. It is still not easy for a woman to leave her domestic duties for a week's class).

19. These two farmers are not average. They are outstanding individuals with determination and persistence that has led to their success. But they started with the same resources and disadvantages as their neighbors, and have been able to earn themselves a dignified life, to walk, in the words of Don Antonio, with their heads held high. While further advanced than most of their colleagues, they are not alone in investing in a licit economy.

What Next

10. ICT presented its research as a technical resource at the kick-off of the Acceso project, a private-public effort to improve cacao production and marketing. It also presented video of Antonio and Judith describing their cacao farms. For conference participants, it was a human face to the rhetoric of helping farmers improve production. For ICT, Acceso is one way to achieve the next important step: building a secure market at a fair price for the increase production of improved cacao. The project will also foster interchanges among growers, scientists, technicians and consuming industries in the participating countries (Colombia, Ecuador, Bolivia and Peru). ICT will continue its work with farmers, coordinating with USAID's alternative development program, and will be a technical resource for the project. This promising project should be another tool to help farmers who reject the myth that only coca can feed and educate their families.

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